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Past, Current FCC Commissioners Take Stock

Current and former FCC commissioners from both sides of the aisle speaking today during a wide-ranging discussion at the Technology Policy Institute’s virtual Aspen Forum offered varying perspectives on what the agency has done well or poorly in recent years, the state of telecommunications service in the U.S., and what the Commission’s priorities should be going forward.

Democratic FCC Commissioner Geoffrey Starks credited telecommunications services for maintaining the health of their networks during the period of increased demand caused by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

But, he added, more needs to be done to increase the availability and affordability of broadband service.

"I do think we are failing some families, particularly low-income families, in ways that are going to have long-term implications to our economy,” Mr. Starks said. “People who are not connected are being left behind in more ways than ever.”

The FCC, lawmakers, and other policymakers need to find ways to make Internet services more affordable, particularly in urban areas and for people of color, Mr. Starks added.

“Obviously we have focused a lot on rural access,” he said. “But more than three times as many Americans live in urban areas that lack access. ... When you're looking at the magnitude, just in sheer numbers, we have a larger number of people without access in urban areas.”

While he acknowledged there is “still work to do” to expand Internet availability, Republican Commissioner Brendan Carr was also complementary of telecom companies for having a “strong network in place” that has helped many Americans weather the pandemic.

The “first step” toward expanding broadband service is to “incentivize the massive investment in buildout” that is needed for 5G, Mr. Carr said.

Mr. Carr also stressed the importance he places on making it easier for companies to build out their networks, as well as the need for increasing the workforce available to complete those projects.

Former Democratic FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn said she would give the U.S. a grade of “B-minus-minus” for how well it has handled the job of making sure all Americans can access the Internet, particularly during the pandemic.
"The private sector in a lot of ways has stepped up," she said, but added, "We have fallen short" on making the Internet available and affordable to all Americans.

Among other things, she bemoaned broadband mapping for not being accurate enough to show where the true need for broadband service is.

"The hardest hit areas [by the pandemic] are still asking, 'Where is my Internet access? I need it. My kids, especially, need it,'" she said. "We've fallen short. The government needs to look in the mirror and say, 'How do we do a better job?'"

Ms. Clyburn argued the sole focus in the country should not be on the buildout of 5G networks, but also on adoption of those services by consumers.

“What is it all worth if the people that need it most, aren't able to connect?” she asked.

On other matters, Ms. Clyburn was among those who questioned whether the current Universal Service Fund model is sustainable and suggested Congress needs to examine the matter.

“We can no longer act like this is not an issue," she said. “There is not going to be a perfect solution. ... We can no longer afford to punt."

Former Republican FCC Commissioner Robert McDowell offered a favorable review of the state of the U.S. telecommunications, and added, “I think it's terrific that we have this healthy amount of paranoia that there is more to be done, because there is more to be done.”

The U.S., he said, led the world in 4G, adding that “we have a great head of steam forming going into 5G.”

Overall, Mr. McDowell said, the U.S. will be best served by incentivizing capital investment that will lead to more innovation, better services, and lower prices for consumers.

The robustness of U.S. broadband networks has helped the country make it through the pandemic, he said. “We could not as a country have stayed together 10 years ago without the technology we have today.” —Jeff Williams

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